

Two Newly Researched Cycles of Mosaics in San Marco, Venice: Mary's Childhood and Genesis¹

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Abstract

The article presents two cycles of mosaics in San Marco, Venice that need to be better known. They are thus: Mary's childhood within the western bay of the south transept, and Genesis, which is situated in the atrium. The latter is especially intriguing as it very probably was inspired in its conception by a written source that has survived (albeit fragmentarily) to the present day: the Cotton manuscript (its part that is now in the British Library, London). There is a resurgence in the research concerning the second series of visual episodes which I discuss here (that within the atrium), and even though at least three books have been written about both cycles², they still need more public exposure. I shall begin my text with a short history of Venice itself and of San Marco basilica/cathedral, and then focus especially on its decoration, particularly that made in mosaic within the above two mentioned areas of the building. This paper was written because the colleagues at ASPROM (the Association for the Study and Promotion of Roman Mosaics in Britain) asked me to give a lecture at their Summer Symposium in the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, on the 22nd of June, 2024. That happened not long after the closure of an exhibition about mosaics titled *The Romans and us*, which I curated between 3rd of January and 6th of April 2024 in Wolfson College, University of Oxford. After the Symposium in June the audience suggested that I shall publish the text I presented.

¹More details are thus: *The Romans and us*, an exhibition of research photos and copies of Roman mosaics (Western and Eastern/Byzantine). That display contained some mosaics also realized by Laurence Payne.

²Kurt Weitzmann and Herbert L. Kessler (1986), *The Cotton Genesis. British Library Codex Cotton Otho B. VI*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Martin Büchsel, Herbert Kessler, and Rebecca Müller (eds.) (2014), *Das Atrium von San Marco in Venedig: Die Genese der Genesismosaiken und ihre mittelalterliche Wirklichkeit* [The Atrium of San Marco in Venice: The Genesis and Medieval Reality of the Genesis Mosaics]; Papers from a symposium held at Bad Homburg, Forschungskolleg Humanwissenschaften, 22-23 June 2012; German-English texts, Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 2014, and Elena Ene Drăghici-Vasilescu (2018) *Heavenly sustenance in Patristic texts and Byzantine iconography*, London, Basingstoke: Palgrave. In this book I discuss fragments from the cycle referring to Mary.

Keywords

San Marco/St Mark's Venice, Mary's Infancy, Cotton Manuscript, Genesis Cycle of Images, British Library

1. Introduction

The mosaic is one of the media through which the Romans artistically expressed themselves in the same measure within the North, South, East, and West of their Empire. The building of San Marco is perhaps the foremost location where they did so. The manner in which some of their imagistic scenes were rendered in Venice makes them original, despite the fact that the same themes were and are still represented in other media (wall paintings, wooden panels, ivory carving, etc.). In any case, the artistic motifs which the Venetian ornamentation discussed here displays need to be better known. The sheer size of this historical structure does not facilitate the process of easily acquiring familiarity with its art. The article is a contribution to the efforts to counteract this state of affairs. It is divided as follows: remarks about Venice in the Middle Ages; some aspects of the construction of San Marco; comments about some of its decoration; specific motifs in San Marco's mosaics; particular motifs in Cotton manuscript, and the manner in which some visual motifs in the Venetian building relate to those within the above-mentioned Late Antiquity script.

I need to insert a note here: despite the fact that the nexus between San Marco decorated atrium and Cotton manuscript was put forward in the ninth decade of the twentieth century, when a complete book (Weitzmann & Kessler, 1986) and a few articles were written about it (see, for instance, Wenzel, 1987), no other works were published on the same subject-matter until 2014, when Martin Büchsel, Herbert Kessler, and Rebecca Müller edited the works of a symposium held at Bad Homburg in 2012 (Büchsel, Kessler, & Müller (eds.), 2014). Because of this temporary hiatus, I consider the research about the above-mentioned connection summarized within my paper “new”, i.e. newly researched. Before and during the symposium in Oxford I tested the audience, and its members didn't know about it. I applaud the initiative of the German colleagues to re-open the discussion about the link San Marco-Cotton manuscript. Also the fact that the latter is not very accessible and the cyber-attack on the British Library in 2024 has destroyed the information about it that was posted on-line made me wish to bring it again into light together with its probable connexion with the monument in the Blue Lagoon.

2. The Church of San Marco During the Middle Ages

2.1. The City of Venice

Venice flourished especially from the eleventh century on and reached a climax in its artistic development during the thirteenth century. Eleventh century was an

extremely propitious time for the political and economic life of Venice (Diacono, 1458, attributed, 11th century; Caracciolo Aricò, 2002: pp. 17-32; 2011: pp. 375-418, and Caracciolo Aricò, 2008-2010; Zuliani, 1996: pp. 17-32; 1997: pp. 153-163); many remarkable cultural endeavours were carried out during that hundred years. This prosperity led Emperor Henry IV (1084-1105) to declare the city a *regnum* (a kingdom, i.e. a city state) in 1095. Otto Demus comments on the context that made possible these achievements and surmises that the chrysobull of 1082 (or 1092 according to the results of newer research; Frankopan, 2004: pp. 135-160), which ensured “a virtual trade monopoly in the eastern Mediterranean [...] at the end of the eleventh century and the beginning of the twelfth might have facilitated the influx of Byzantine artists and mosaic material.” (Demus & Kessler (eds.), 1988: p. 5). The Doge Domenico Cantarini *protosebastos* (1043-1070) built a new church—one dedicated to St. Mark (Demus & Kessler, 1988: p. 1)³—in his palace complex (Shepard, 2010: pp. 381, 372-386); the construction seems to have been initiated in 1063 (Papacostas, 2010: p. 387).

2.2. Basilica San Marco



(a)



(b)

Figure 1. (a) San Marco/San Mark’s basilica, Venice as it looks today, after the marble was added on the external walls of a brick structure in the ninetieth century (when the basilica became the cathedral of the city). The first chapel on the today site was built in the 828; the main consecration took place in 1084; (b) I in San Marco/ St. Mark’s Piazza/Square during the XXIV-lea International Congress of Byzantine Studies Venice-Padua, 2023.

³San Marco has only been the city’s cathedral since 1807, when it became the seat of the Patriarch of Venice, archbishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Venice, formerly at San Pietro di Castello; O. Demus, *The mosaic decoration of San Marco*, p. 1.

There have been three churches on the site where the cathedral stands today and nearby (**Figure 1**)⁴. There exists, of course, a rich literature about the architecture, iconographical programme, and other aspects of San Marco/St. Mark basilica, as it was initially called (it became a cathedral only in the nineteenth century, in 1807). The image in **Figure 2** shows how the building looked before that, when the marble was added on the exterior walls.

As about its mosaics, the Photo Archives of the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC contains many items reproducing them, and that is important because even today, with modern technology, it is very difficult to photograph them inside the cupolas of San Marco. I published myself something about the Venetian mosaics in two books: one in 2018 (Ene Drăghici-Vasilescu, 2018, esp. 61-62, and Chapter 7 [109 - 140]), another in and 2021 (Ene Drăghici-Vasilescu, 2021), and within an article in 2020 (Ene Drăghici-Vasilescu, 2020: pp. 695-740). In my current paper here I use material and images from my books *Glimpses into Byzantium. Its Philosophy and Arts* (Ene Drăghici-Vasilescu, 2021) and *Heavenly sustenance in Patristic texts and Byzantine iconography* (Ene Drăghici-Vasilescu, 2018).

Fabio Barry comments on the architecture and decoration of the three

⁴The first St. Mark church was a temporary building within the Doge's Palace (actually nearby it, on the territory of the nunnery of Saint Zacharia), erected in 828 when Venetian merchants allegedly stole the supposed relics of Mark the Evangelist from Alexandria. The most important document about its foundation is the testament of the Doge Justinian Partecipacius (d. 829), preserved in a manuscript from the fourteenth century (printed in a complete form in A. Gloria, *Codice*, I, p. 12 f. and R. Cessi, "Documenti", p. 93. It is also published in an abbreviated form in *La Ducale Basilica, Documenti*, p. 3, no. 20). The first church was replaced by a new one on its present site in 832; from the same century dates the first bell tower. The new church was burned in a rebellion in 976. The church was rebuilt in 978 and again in 1063 to form the basis of the present basilica. It was consecrated in 1084, the same year in which the body of Saint Mark was supposedly rediscovered in a pillar by Vitale Faliero, doge at the time. The building also incorporates a low tower (now housing St Mark's Treasure), believed by some to have been part of the original Doges Palace. Within the first half of the thirteenth century the narthex and the new façade were accomplished and most of the mosaics were completed. The presbytery is separated by an altar screen formed by eight red marble columns crowned with a high Crucifix and statues by Pier Paolo and Jacobello Dalle Masegne, masterpiece of Gothic sculpture (late fourteenth century). Behind the screen there are marble banisters with bronze statues by Jacopo Sansovino (1486-1570) which represent the Evangelists, and Paliari's Four Doctors. Above the high altar containing St. Mark's relics there is the canopy ("ciborium") supported by columns decorated with remarkable reliefs; one of them contains the scene of St. Anne nursing discussed here. The altarpiece is the famous Pala d'Oro made by Byzantine masters. The new church was burned in a rebellion in 976 and rebuilt in 978 and again in 1063 to form the basis of the present basilica. Because of this succession of building work, more than one consecration took place; the most important of them was that from 1084. See O. Demus, *The mosaic decorations of San Marco*, p. 3 and *The Church of San Marco in Venice: History. History, Architecture, Sculpture* (with a contribution by Ferdinando Forlati), Washington D. C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection 6, 1960, pp. 67-69, 88-100; Demus (with a contribution by R. M. Kloos), *The mosaic of San Marco in Venice: The eleventh and twelfth centuries*, University of Chicago Press for Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D. C., Chicago and London, 1984, vol. 1; Otto Demus and Maria Andaloro, *Basilica Patriarcale in Venezia. San Marco. I Mosaici. Le Iscrizioni. La Pala D'Oro*, Milan: Fabbri Editori, 1991; Otto Demus, Wladimiro Dorigo; Antonio Niero, and Guido Perocco, *Patriarcal Basilica in Venice. San Marco. The Mosaics. The History. The Lighting*, Milan: Fabbri, 1990; O. Demus (with H. L. Kessler) (ed.), *The mosaic decorations of San Marco, Venice*, Chicago, London, 1988 and the other works he published on San Marco; for other periods see especially his study *The Mosaics of San Marco in Venice* mentioned above, Chicago and London, vols. 1-4, 1984-1988. See also Maria Da Villa Urbani, *La Basilica di San Marco*, Storti Edizioni, Venice, 2001; Sabina Vianello (ed.), *Le chiese di Venezia*, Electa, Rome, 1993.

successive buildings: “From the moment, in 828, that Venice abducted the remains of the apostle Mark from Alexandria, the construction and adornment of San Marco became an exercise in authentication by appropriation. Although the new palatine chapel built to house the saint’s body had begun as an imitation of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, it was rebuilt in the image of the Apostoleion in Constantinople, where Constantine’s dynasty had been laid to rest alongside the bodies of the apostles.” (Barry, 2010: pp. 7-62; Demus, 1960: pp. 67-69, 88-100).



Figure 2. Church of San Marco. Reconstruction of the eleventh century North and South façades and of the apse realized by Napoleone Girotto in c. 1800 (in a plan discovered on the occasion of a relatively recent restoration). Orsoni et al. (eds.) (2011), *Ferdinando Ongania. La Basilica di San Marco 1881-1893*, 2011, The catalogue of the exhibition organised by the Procuratoria of St. Mark, in the Museum of St. Mark, Venice, 16 July-27 November 2011, Venice: Marsilio, p. 118.

The majority of researchers still believe that the mosaics within the basilica – at least the first ones—were made by masters from the Byzantine capital who were commissioned by Domenico Selvo (the doge in 1071-1084); (Demus & Kloos, 1984-1988: p. 3). As we shall see further, Liz James and a team from the British Museum have proved that from the twelfth century the mosaics were produced locally.

Otto Demus believes that the most important of the few consecrations of St. Mark’s basilica took place in 1084. He thinks that this “would probably have concerned the main altar” and “if this is true, it may mean that the first decoration of the main apse was completed in 1084” (i.e. “first decoration” in terms of mosaic; frescoes probably already existed on at least some of the walls of the church);⁵ (Demus & Kloos, 1984-1988: p. 3). Selvo would have commissioned Byzantine mosaicists to finish the decorative programme in time for this event); (Demus & Kloos, 1984-1988: p. 292).

⁵Ibid.

2.3. The Mosaics of San Marco/St. Mark's Basilica

Here are a few beautiful apses in San Marco where the mosaicists excelled in their art (**Figure 3** and **Figure 4**):

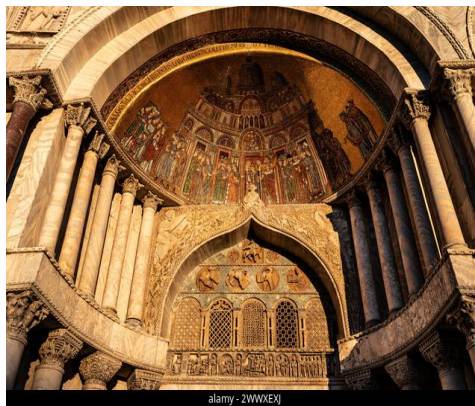


Figure 3. San Marco/San Mark's basilica, Venice. Porta di Sant'Alipio, thirteenth century (c. 1270-275). The Source of the image: File: Basilica di San Marco—Porta Sant'Alipio (EOS5001403).jpg—Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 4. The mosaic of the Pentecost within St Mark's Basilica, Venice; circa 1063-1180, in the book, E. Ene Drăghici-Vasilescu, *Glimpses into Byzantium. Its Philosophy and Arts*, Oxford, 2021, p. 74.

According to Demus, some of the masters who worked in San Marco were already in the area—they were involved, for instance, in renovating the cathedral on the island of Torcello—and his statement is very likely true. Comparison of the mosaics completed by the decorators of St. Mark's main porch with Byzantine pieces of known age indicates “that the San Marco figures date from the last three decades of the eleventh century, perhaps even as early as about 1070 [...] Palaeography to help in dating the mosaics exist; the inscriptions that serve as caption for various scenes are important in dating the works. Depending on their age, they can be divided into two groups, with the older one dated between 1060 and 1099 (Demus et al., 1990: p. 19). The style in which the Venetian mosaics assigned by Demus to the eleventh century were executed has its closest parallel in the near contemporary (from before 1050) Greek mosaics in the narthex of Hosios Loukas that depict the Apostles (Demus et al., 1990: p. 18).

L. James opens to debate whether the artists who ornamented the basilica were from the Empire and questions the correlation between their ethnicity and their craft: “In an Italian context, the question of whether mosaicists were Greek or Venetian or generically Italian seems to come down, in scholarly analysis, to what bit of mosaic is being discussed. The implication is always that the Byzantine-looking mosaics are the work of Byzantine mosaicists and the others are not. This may not be the best way to consider the question. Documentary evidence for Greek mosaicists at San Marco is almost non-existent. Renato Polacco (2005) claims that some documents state that doge Orselo employed a mosaicist from Constantinople. Demus does not mention this, but says that later chronicles relate that Selvo brought a mosaic master from Constantinople. In 1153, a Marcus Grecus is recorded in documents as a mosaicist but, as Demus indicates, there is no evidence as to whether or not he worked on the mosaics of San Marco.”⁶ (James, 2010: p. 232).

2.4. Two Particular Cycles of Mosaics in San Marco: Mary's Infancy in the Western Bay and Genesis in the Atrium

I treat here, as announced in the title of the paper, two cycles of mosaics in San Marco of which details are not yet well known:

1) One is **the cycle concerning Mary's childhood (known also as the cycle of Anna and Joachim)** in the **western bay** of the south transept of St. Mark/San Marco; this is the subject-matter of my own research (Ene Drăghici-Vasilescu, 2018).

2) The other is **the cycle of Genesis** in the **atrium** of San Marco. I will present it as it connects with the Cotton manuscript in the British Library.

⁶See also Demus, *Mosaics of San Marco*, vol. 1, p. 292; Renato Polacco “Lo stile dei mosaici medievali di Venezia”, in Clementina Rizzardi (ed.), *Venezia e Bisanzio: Aspetti della cultura artistica bizantina da Ravenna a Venezia (V-XIV secolo)*, Venice: Istituto veneto di scienze, lettere ed arti, 2005, p. 457, 458, 460, 465, and Irina Andreescu-Treadgold, “I primi mosaicisti a San Marco”, in R. Polacco (ed.), *Storia dell'arte marciana: l'architettura. atti del Convegno internazionale di studi*, Venezia, 11-14 ottobre 1994, Venice: Marsilio, 1997, 105-122.

Both these series of images are represented on a background of golden tesserae; the scenes themselves are made up of variously coloured pieces.

2.4.1. The Cycle of Mosaics Referring to Mary's Early Life. Joachim's Offering and the Birth of the Virgin

The **west wall of the south transept** is especially known because it renders the discovery of the relics of St Mark. That was the first scene depicted in this area of the building (Krén & Marx, 2024).

1) Joachim's Offering

But that is also the place where the series of mosaics entitled “The cycle of Mary's early life” in San Marco Basilica is; I discuss about these in my book *Heavenly sustenance* (Ene Drăghici-Vasilescu, 2018). The series consists of many scenes, among them being “Joachim's offering within the Temple” (Figure 5) and “Anne nursing baby Mary for the first time, just after giving birth”, Figure 6 (in Venice people know it as Anne giving birth to Mary; what we see in fact is Anne holding Mary on her lap in a position typical for nursing).



Figure 5. “Joachim making the offering in the Temple” with the misplaced inscription describing the scene that comes after it, The birth of Mary. Mosaic in the western bay of the south transept, c. 1250. Background of golden tesserae; the scene itself is made up of variously coloured pieces. Photo E.E D-V (conditions for taking photographs are difficult as the mosaic is on the high ceiling).

Despite the fact that a scene exists that shows the “Joachim's offering” (this is mentioned within the Gospel of James written in about AD 150), the caption wrongly attached to it, above Joachim's head (Figure 5) states:

‘HECIAPITHECNVTPIT HIC SVSCIPIT HECBENDICIT’, i.e. “Haec parit, haec nutrit, hic suscipit haec benedicit”/“This [woman] gives birth, nourishes, accepts, and blesses”. There are more captions/inscriptions written in tesserae around this one and their mixed-up suggests that more scenes existed. Probably one representing the theme “the Leaving the Temple and the Return home of Joachim and Anne after the offering of both was rejected” was there because there is an

inscription on the wall stating: “HIC SPERNIT DANTES STERILES REDEUNT LACRYMANTES” (“Here [are those] barren people who bring gifts; they were spurned and went back in tears”). The tradition usually refers to Joachim’s offering, but in the Venetian scene we discuss here both parents were involved in the act. The rendering of this episode was probably lost during the seventeenth century restoration conducted by Dominicus Gigola/Cicola (1690); (Saccardo, 1896: p. 279; Demus & Andaloro, 1991: p. 68, 98)⁷ he re-worked some of the original tableaux that existed there from 1084 and within the process some visual scenes were lost.

2) The birth of the Virgin

Concerning the second scene (Figure 6) Anne’s nursing position does not have an inscription since that was “moved” to the previous decorative episode.



Figure 6. The birth of the Virgin [actually, what is represented is what is assumed to be the first feed] (*La nascita della Vergine*). Mosaic in the western bay of the south transept, c. 1250. Background of golden tesserae; the scene itself is made up of variously coloured pieces. Photo E ED-V.

Both images, and the other following them in sequence, are typical for any Paleologan painting programme that includes the cycle of Mary’s infancy.

As indicated, the mosaics in San Marco underwent major restoration in the seventeenth century (completed in 1690). Demus comments on the result of this work, and in his report on changes to the “Infancy cycle” he states “The mosaic of 1690 does not quite correspond to this inscription since it represents only the Rejection of Joachim’s offering and not the Return of the Virgin’s parents.” (Demus & Kloos, 1984-1988: p. 127, vol. 1,). Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne points

⁷Dominico Cicola (Gigola) made the mosaic of the “Life of the Virgin” cycle after cartoons by Gianantonio Fumiani; see Pietro Saccardo, *Les mosaïques de Saint Marc à Venise*, Venice: F. Ongania, 1896, p. 279. See also Otto Demus and Maria Andaloro, *Basilica Patriarcale in Venezia. San Marco. I Mosaici. Le Iscrizioni. La Pala D’Oro*, Milan: Fabbri, 1991, 68 (colour illustration after the mosaic *La nascita della Vergine*, p. 98).

out that, typically, the depicted story of Mary's early years includes the following episodes: Joachim's offerings rejected; Joachim and Anne returning home (sometimes the artists conflate these two); Saint Joachim in the wilderness; Saint Anne in the garden (the last two sometimes rendered within the same painting); Nativity of the Virgin; The Virgin Blessed by the Priests; and The Presentation of the Virgin to the Temple [sometimes a scene representing Anna pregnant is also depicted], especially in Cappadocia, (Lafontaine-Dosogne, 1964: pp. 62-65, vol. 1).⁸ Judging by the representations of this cycle in various churches, for instance, Kızıl Çukur in Cappadocia (sixth-seventh century), (Thierry, 2002: pp. 122-123),⁹ the church of the Saviour in Chora (*The Kariye Djami*, within Constantinople/Istanbul; decorated in the fourteenth century), (Underwood, 1966a: pp. 60-72, , vol. 1; 1966b: pp. 86-124, vol. 2), *Timios Stavros* church at Pelendri, Cyprus (Paleologan; mid-fourteenth century), (Bacci, 2006: p. 213)¹⁰ later *Humor*, Romania (1535), (Balaban Bara, 2012, 2018)¹¹ and some of the churches listed by Lafontaine-Dosogne in her book about the iconography of Mary's childhood (Lafontaine-Dosogne, 1964: pp. 203-207, vol. 1),¹² it could be securely assumed that the two scenes from the Venetian basilica are the remains of a similar ensemble of images. Therefore they give an indication as to how the first mosaicists in the eleventh century arranged this part of the church decoration. It seems that initially the painterly "narration" visible today in San Marco had, additionally (to the left) an image of Mary's parents before her birth and (to the right) the Nativity of Mary, her blessing by the priests, and her dedication to the temple. The researcher Nicole Thierry believes that this type of illustration (the Nativity cycle) was discontinued after the exemplar in Venice (Thierry, 1994: p. 228, vol. 2). That is not true; the representation of the mariological cycle was carried out until the end of the fourteenth century in churches from Southern Europe. Further north, in Romania, it continued until the sixteenth century.

⁸Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Iconographie de l'enfance de la Vierge dans l'empire byzantin et en Occident*, Brussels: Académie Royale de Belgique, vol. 1, 1964, pp. 62-65 (Joachim's Offerings Rejected); 65-67 (Joachim and Anne Returning Home); 77-81 (Saint Joachim in the Wilderness); 91-121 (Nativity of the Virgin); 120 (The breast-feeding of Mary); 128-133 (The Virgin Blessed by the Priests), and 136-167 (The Presentation of the Virgin to the Temple).

⁹André Grabar dates the construction of Kızıl Çukur to the period between the tenth and the eleventh century, see A. Grabar, *Christian iconography: a study of its origins*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1969, p. 129; Ann Wharton-Epstein, "Rock-cut chapels in Göreme Valley, Cappadocia: The Yılanlı group and the column churches," *Cahiers archéologiques. Fin de l'antiquité et moyen-âge*, vol. 24, 1975, pp. 115-135, p. 118. The Mariological cycle is found in the Northern chapel dedicated to Anne and Joachim. Twelve scenes survive, ten of which include Mary's parents.

¹⁰Michele Bacci, "Syrian, Palaiologan, and Gothic Murals in the 'Nestorian' Church of Famagusta", *Δελτίον της χριστιανικής αρχαιολογικής εταιρείας*, ser. IV, 27 (2006), p. 213 [pp. 207-220].

¹¹Adriana Balaban Bara, "The Lives of Joachim and Anne depicted in the Church of Humor Monastery, Moldavia (Romania)", in Elena Ene D(răghici-Vasilescu), *Devotion to St. Anne in Texts and Images. From Byzantium to the Late European Middle Ages*, London: Palgrave, 2018, pp. 1-33; A. Balaban Bara, *The Political and Artistic Program of Prince Petru Rareș of Moldavia*; doctoral dissertation, University of Montreal, 2012. In this case the name of the painter is known—he was Toma of Suceava.

¹²Most of the churches mentioned by J. Lafontaine-Dosogne on pp. 203-207 contain scenes from the infancy of Mary, but not all of them the lactation scene.

2.4.2. The Cycle of Mosaics Representing Genesis Within the Atrium of San Marco: The Creation of Eve (Figure 11), and Abraham Meeting the Angels (Figure 13)

A collective volume published in 2014 in Germany entitled *Das Atrium von San Marco in Venedig: Die Genese der Genesismosaiken und ihre mittelalterliche Wirklichkeit* [The Atrium of San Marco in Venice: The Genesis and Medieval Reality of the Genesis Mosaics] continued, in a way, the work undertaken in the twentieth century by Kurt Weitzmann and Herbert L. Kessler; that included within the book *The Cotton Genesis*. The contemporary to us German team provide interesting information about the connection between Genesis Cotton manuscript in the British Library (fifth-sixth centuries)¹³ and the mosaics representing Genesis within St. Mark's atrium; there are 110 mosaic panels within the respective porch. Here are some images from that place (Figure 7, Figure 8):

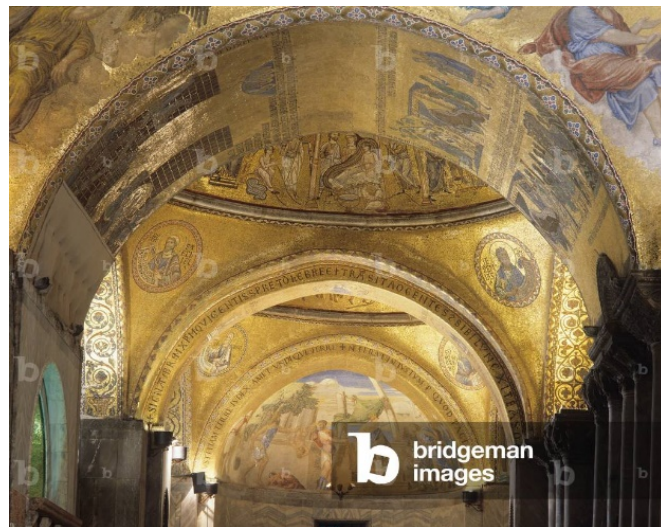


Figure 7. Atrium with the mosaics of Genesis within St. Mark's Basilica, Venice; circa 1275. Source: Photo credit: Cameraphoto Arte Venezia/Bridgeman Images.

¹³The Cotton Genesis (London, British Library, Cotton MS Otho B VI) is a fifth-sixth century luxury Greek illuminated manuscript of the Book of Genesis; it had many miniatures. Constantin von Tischendorf opined (in his book *Monumenta sacra inedita nova colection*, Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, vol. 1, 1857-1870, XIII) that it was written in the fifth century, but later literature puts also forward the sixth century as a possible date. (I think we cannot exclude the possibility that the book was written at the crossroad between the two centuries, or that some text and illustrations were written/made in the fifth century and others in the sixth). H. L. Kessler and K. Weitzmann affirmed that the manuscript was produced in Alexandria as it exhibits stylistic similarities with other Alexandrian works such as the fifth century Charioteer Papyrus (also very richly illustrated). They stated this in their book *The Cotton Genesis. British Library Codex Cotton Otho B. VI* published in Princeton (1986). Cotton MS is one of the oldest illustrated biblical codices to survive to the modern period. Most of the manuscript was destroyed, with other documents, in the Ashburnam House fire in 1731. Only eighteen charred scraps of vellum survived in a reasonable condition. However, after seeing the microfilm of this document within the British Library in June 2024 I have reached the conclusion that more surviving pages can be researched; that despite the fact that some of them are very fragmentary. Some miniatures were copied in the seventeenth century and are now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris (Ms. fr. 9530), where can also be studied. Sir Robert Cotton (1571-1631) acquired the manuscript for his library, which eventually reached the British Museum, and from there, the British Library (in 1753, when it was established).



Figure 8. Atrium with the golden mosaics of Genesis within St. Mark's Basilica, Venice; circa 1275. Source: Alamy images in Wikimedia Commons. Image used in accordance with Creative Commons CC BY-SA 4.0 de.

within the atrium in San Marco there is a cupola dedicated to Abraham, some lunettes, and three cupolas dedicated to Joseph (the biblical character who was sold by his brothers); one image from there is in **Figure 12**.

1) The scene The Creation of Eve (**Figure 9**, **Figure 10**)

The "Creation of Eve" is represented within the Cotton Manuscript as **Figure 9** indicates. In the atrium of San Marco it is depicted as shown in **Figure 10**; it can also be seen from a particular angle in **Figure 8**.



Figure 9. The Creation of Eve. Fragment 3r from the Cotton Genesis (British Library, MS Cotton Otho B. VI). This is a fifth-sixth century Greek illuminated manuscript; it is one of the oldest illustrated biblical codices to survive to the modern times; it was produced in Alexandria, Egypt (see Basilica San Marco The Old Testament). Source: File: CottonGenesisFragment03rGodAdamEve.JPG—Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 10. The Creation of Eve (the second scene from the left). The cycle of mosaics Genesis within the Atrium of St. Mark's Basilica, Venice; circa 1275. Source: Alamy images in Wikimedia Commons.

2) The scene “Abraham meeting the angels”, cf. Gen. 18: 1-33 (Figure 11, Figure 12)

The content of the contemporary German collective book mentioned above refers to the fifth century image within the Cotton Manuscript referring to “Abraham meeting the angels” (Figure 11) and to the thirteenth century (c. 1220 or 1275) decoration in San Marco (Figure 12).

As mentioned, the result of this relatively new research carried out by Büchsel, Kessler, and Müller was published in their book of 2014. The team maintain that the decoration in the particular area of the basilica they discuss not only follows scenes from the manuscript in London, but closely copied them. I believe that their assessment is justified, and I will explain further why this is the case. I state this while keeping in mind that at that time in human history (the fifth-sixth centuries) the illuminated manuscripts (especially those of the same book, the Bible) looked very similar. Nevertheless, after viewing another surviving Egyptian object of the time, I incline even more to agree with the German researchers. The said item is the Abegg Stiftung textile (129 - 346 CE), today in Riggisberg, which also visually represents stories from the Old Testament (MacKenzie Wilson, 2004).¹⁴ Within the latter artefact the representation of Eve is completely different than that within the Cotton Manuscript and San Marco atrium.

¹⁴I thank Prof. Roger Wilson from the University of British Columbia for drawing my attention to this textile. It is mentioned within the book David MacKenzie Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry. The Complete Tapestry in Colour with Introduction, Description and Commentary*, London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 2004.



Figure 11. Folio 26v of the Cotton Genesis representing the scene “Abraham meeting the angels”, cf. Gen. 18: 1-33; folio 26v within Cotton Genesis manuscript (London, British Library, Cotton MS Otho B VI). Source: Cotton Genesis—Wikipedia.



Figure 12. Abraham welcoming the Angels. Mosaic in the Atrium of St. Mark, which is situated within the cupola dedicated to Abraham, c. 1250. Background of golden tesserae; the scene itself is made up of variously coloured pieces. Source: Alamy images in Wikimedia Commons.

2.4.3. Other Representations Within the Cotton Manuscript (Figure 13, Figure 14) Which Can Be Related with Some in St. Mark's (Figures 15-17)

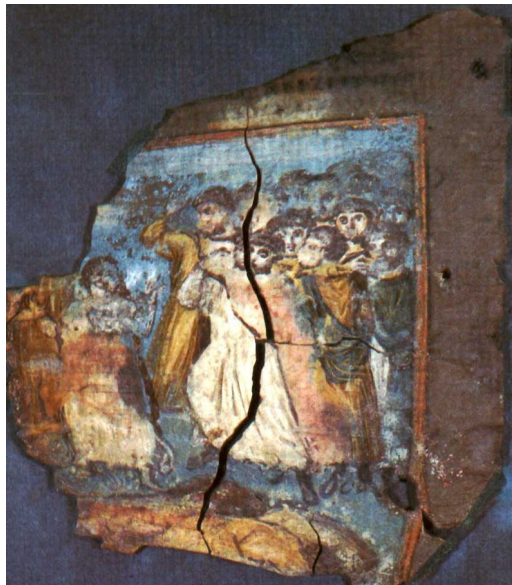


Figure 13. Fragment 4 from the Cotton Genesis (British Library, MS Cotton Otho B. VI). I think it represents Moses's return with his people from their slavery in Egypt (In various sources it is written that it represents what is known as "The House of Lot", cf. Gen. 19: 1-38); see, for example, the source of the image I use here. Source: CottonGenesisFragment04vLotsHouse—Category: Cotton Genesis (5th-6th C)—BL Cotton MS Otho B VI—Wikimedia Commons



Figure 14. A human figure within Cotton Genesis manuscript (London, British Library, Cotton MS Otho B VI).



Figure 15. Joseph with the brethren in Egypt (left)? If so, it is the illustration to Genesis 43: 30-31 within the Cotton manuscript (On the right is the scene known as “The Wise Judgment of King Solomon”; 1 Kings 3: 16-28). Image from the facsimile edition of Thomas Hartwell Horne, 1852.



Figure 16. Joseph asleep (the image on the highest register). Joseph in front of the Pharaoh. The interpretation of Joseph’s dream. The north side of the atrium. Source: Alamy; basilica-san-marco-venice-atrium. RF-2D549DW: The Italian caption for this 1920s illustration reads: “Forme di Letti e Sedie dal mosaico storie de Faraone sec XIII Basilico San Marco Vestibulo” (“Forms of Beds and Chairs from the mosaic stories of Pharaoh. 13th century Basilico San Marco Vestibulo”).



Figure 17. The cycle of Genesis mosaics in San Marco; circa 1275. Source: Alamy images in Wikimedia Commons.

3. Conclusion

1) Firstly, the fact that an ancient manuscript of the Bible inspired the decoration of a church in Venice should not be a surprise since it is known that the city within the lagoon on the Adriatic Sea was, until late in the Middle Ages, a hub where manuscripts were kept, exchanged, and bought. A multitude of such documents circulated along the *Via Egnatia*, especially coming from Mount Athos (Venice is situated in easy access from Dyrrachium/Durrës in today Albania, where Egnatian Way began; (Grote, 2013, p. 440¹⁵).

2) Concerning the source of the tesserae in medieval Venice—those used to make the mosaics we have discussed here—I. C. Freestone, M. Bimson, D. Buckton, L. James, and other researchers inquired, as I noticed earlier, whether they were produced locally (Freestone, M. Bimson, and D. Buckton, 1988, pp. 271-280). The conclusion of this team was the following—in James’ words: “Whether the Venetians possessed the skill of making colored glass in the **eleventh century** is uncertain. If they did not, then the easiest way to get glass for the manufacture of tesserae would have been to obtain already coloured glass as cakes, or as sheets or even as tesserae.” (James, 2010: p. 232). James also considers that by the **twelfth century** the Venetians could have been producing their own coloured glass tesserae; she justifies her opinion using the results of analysis carried out at San Marco by a team from the British Museum. The specialists from London have found that these decorative pieces (tesserae) at the Venetian cathedral were made from a typical Western European glass – high potash, lime, and silica – in contrast to the soda-lime-silica glass being manufactured in the Eastern Mediterranean, mainly in Byzantium.

Therefore, it seems that the masters who embellished San Marco after the twelfth century were locals, and those who worked before that time came indeed from Byzantium; some of the latter might have trained apprentices who lived in Venice. There is also the possibility that Venetian people were sent to Byzantium to learn the craft of making and laying mosaic. This is actually Demus’s opinion regarding the authorship of the decoration in the churches situated in the Blue Lagoon. He posits that “[Venetian] artists seem to have received their training in Byzantium around the middle of the eleventh century” (Demus et al., 1990: pp. 18-19).¹⁶ In any case, the new findings offer additional evidence for the view that during the eleventh-thirteenth centuries mosaicists, craftsmen, and also artistic motifs circulated between the two [cities] and across the Mediterranean at large. The most famous outcome of such interactions are (according to Demus, Barry, and other scholars) the already stated similarities between San Marco and the church of the Apostles (*Apostoleion*) within the Byzantine capital. New material is expected to come out as a result of Rudolf Dellerman’s research on Porta di

¹⁵Dyrrachium, today Durrës in Albania, was founded by Greeks colonists from Corinth and Corcyra in cooperation with the local Illyrian tribe Taulantii in c. 676 BC century BC. The initial name of the city was Epidamnos; the Romans called it Dyrrachium. See George Grote, *A History of Greece: From the Time of Solon to 403 BC*, London: Routledge, 2013, p. 440.

¹⁶Demus et al., *Patriarchal Basilica in Venice*, 1990, pp. 18-19.

Sant' Alipio; (Dellerman, current work).¹⁷ I found information about his research in 2018, and I checked it in 2024—not finding out more made me assume the work is still in progress (There is also a doctoral dissertation about San Marco in progress in Princeton written by Joan Richardson; it is to be expected that it also brings some novelty about how this building looked in the Middle Ages).

Another conclusion which I would like to draw is one contained in Demus' following statement: "The Venetians were never averse to repeating time and again what was held to be important." (Demus & Kloos, 1984-1988: p. 22).¹⁸ That is visible in their art and in the repetition of some of their visual motifs.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Note

Image used in accordance with Creative Commons CC BY-SA 4.0 de (most of them already have it). I indicated a source for all.

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¹⁷Rudolf Dellerman, "Porta di Sant'Alipio", in Herbert Kessler and Martin Büchsel (eds.), work in progress on San Marco, München.

¹⁸Demus (with Kloos), The mosaic of San Marco, p. 22.

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